

Gender Transgressions as Restorative Forces in *Cymbeline*

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When Imogen makes her crossdressed debut in act 3 of *Cymbeline*, exhausted from travel and wearing the disguise of a boy named Fidele, she complains that “a man’s life is a tedious one” (3.6.1). In appearance and action, Imogen has immersed herself in masculinity, yet in speech, she distances herself from it. She assures the audience that she has not transformed into a man; she is merely pretending to be one. Her comment, seemingly inconsequential, would have resonated with early modern audiences at the theatre—a space that famously blurred identity categories. Disguises were common amongst actors and spectators, boy actors played female roles, and members of each tier of England’s stratified society attended the same playhouses. Several decades of scholarship considers the effects of crossdressing in the early modern period and its impact on gender ideologies. Jean E. Howard summarizes these findings when she writes, “as fact and as idea, crossdressing threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination” (Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 94). Although Imogen’s crossdressing has the potential to threaten the social order by suggesting unregulated gender fluidity, her language indicates her stable gender identity.

Imogen is not usually at the center of critical discussions about crossdressing, and that is exactly why she proves a useful case for reexamining female characters who dress as boys in Shakespeare. Many scholars have referred to *Cymbeline* as a “hodge-podge” and “dismissed as faults its complex plots and incongruities” (Wayne 28). At times, it is disorienting that the playwright takes considerable liberties with time, space, and, perhaps most interestingly, identity. Unlike some of Shakespeare’s more nuanced plays that devote energy to thorough characterization, *Cymbeline* prioritizes action, and the play’s sweeping plot tends to overwhelm its characters. As a result, Imogen’s crossdressing can feel like an afterthought. Certainly, her

male disguise would have intrigued—and possibly concerned—audiences, but her disguise competes with her stumbling upon long-lost brothers, consuming poison, escaping a threatened rape, and waking up next to a decapitated corpse. Her identity requires careful consideration because it is routinely buried under the play's shocking events and constant plot turns. She shares traits with some of Shakespeare's most famous heroines, yet she is often disregarded because she is unable to rise above *Cymbeline*'s noise, and she exists in what many critics agree is a defective play.

Imogen's inability to transcend the confusion of the play is precisely what warrants attention. Even within her own narrative, she demonstrates an unwillingness to grasp power that is available to her, and in that way, she is a normative woman in a transgressive disguise. The play also takes great pains to emphasize her domesticity and reluctance to do something else that her society saw as transgressive: travel alone as a woman. It is often ignored that the female characters who crossdress in Shakespeare's plays are also travelers. Both crossdressing and traveling would have jeopardized the reputations of early modern women. Furthermore, the reasons these behaviors were seen as indecorous are the same, as both actions evoked concerns about compromised female chastity and submissiveness. There are many layers to Imogen's identity, and to observe it through a single frame of reference is reductive and limiting. To interpret the play solely with Imogen's crossdressing in mind means turning a blind eye to her status as a traveler, and, of course, the opposite is also true. Merging these two critical frameworks allows for a more thorough understanding of a complicated character in a complicated play. Imogen's ability to transition between gender identities while physically moving from place to place represents common threats to early modern gender systems, yet her inherent femininity continually shows itself—marginalizing her both within the play and the

scope of existing scholarship. She enacts transgressive behavior in theory, but she does not undergo a gender transformation. For that reason, she does not stand out as unusually bold or provocative. In Imogen, Shakespeare presents a female character who engages in behavior that early modern audiences would have recognized as rebellious, but her seeming challenges to gender roles are superficial and eventually rejected. In fact, Shakespeare's depiction of gender transgression in *Cymbeline* legitimates the binary gender system.

II

Imogen decides to travel because she believes her husband Posthumus has summoned her to Milford Haven. She quickly learns that Posthumus, having been tricked by the deceitful Iachimo into believing that Imogen has been unfaithful, has ordered her execution. Luckily for Imogen, Pisanio, Posthumus's servant and the man tasked with her execution, is convinced of her unwavering loyalty, and he discloses the details of the plan instead of enacting them. Imogen is halfway to Milford Haven when she becomes aware of Posthumus's plan, and she is left with few options. Believing her husband wants her dead and realizing that she cannot return home, she chooses to continue her journey and seek safety by serving the Roman general Caius Lucius who is presumed to be settling in Milford Haven. She decides to adopt the disguise of Fidele, a page, to travel safely and gain employment. Importantly, she is also aware that if she travels to Milford Haven, she will be "haply near / The residence of Posthumus" and that she will regularly hear "report" of his actions (3.4.170-173). Although Imogen travels alone, she does so as a response to the actions of men, and she is constantly driven by the impulse to find and serve them.

Through Imogen's travel, the play engages with contemporary discussions about female travelers. Public concern regarding the issue was palpable at the beginning of the 17th century,

and these constraints stemmed from an intense preoccupation with female chastity. If women stayed home, they would not be sexually available. Publications condemning female travel appeared frequently in the 17th century, and Patricia Akhimie cites a “Proclamation touching Passengers,” published in 1606, which mandated that “no woman nor any childe under the age of twenty yeeres...should be permitted to passe over the Seas” (124). In another treatise aimed at preventing female travel, also published in 1606, Thomas Palmer writes that women’s very “Sex” should induce the prohibition of travel because women were “rather for the house then the fielde; and to remain at home” (Akhimie 125). In addition to published denouncements of female travel, women who traveled were subject to harsh social criticism. Barnabe Rich, in *My Ladies Looking Glasse* (1616), cites the Bible to voice public concern about women’s travel. He states:

Salomon thinketh that a good woman should be a home *housewife*...Shee overseeth the waies of her household...but the *pathes of a harlot* (he saith) are *moovabl*, for now she is in the house, now in the streetes, now she lieth in waite in every corner, she is still gadding from place to place, from person to person...she is ever more wandring: her feet are wandring, her eies are wandring, her wits are wandring... (Rich qtd in Slater 218-219)

Rich makes a notable leap from the “good woman” of the house to the “harlot” of the streets, and Michael Slater adeptly notices that Rich’s “increasing anxiety...illustrates how seamlessly a woman’s...physical mobility could come to signify a dangerous sexuality in the early modern imagination” (Slater 219). Rich illustrates a point that Akhimie summarizes when she writes that female travelers in the early modern period were “assumed to be incapable of good judgment regarding travel and vulnerable to conversion and temptation,” and she expands that argument when she explains that women who chose to travel were “seen as available to view and for

review, as if travel itself were a sexually illicit act for women” (Akhimie 125-126). These accounts show that chastity was not just a matter of familial or personal concern; it was also a public one, and the range of concern spans from sea travel to the simple act of leaving the home. It therefore seems that female travel in all forms was a condemnable act.

Reports of female travel highlight female chastity as a primary concern, and narratives that include female travelers generally include justifications of the act. Akhimie’s analysis of Richard Lassels’s manuscript “The Voyage of the Lady Catherine Whetenall from Brussels into Italy” contains evidence of this concept. The manuscript describes a voyage taken by Lady Catherine Whetenall in the first half of the 17th century, and it characterizes Whetenall in a way that preserves her appearance. Akhimie notices that Lassels bridges the dichotomy of domestic femininity and travel through his “artistry” (Akhimie 122). Namely, she observes that Lassels portrays Whetenall as able to travel while “remain[ing] saintly in her static domesticity,” a dynamic she claims is “made possible—or palatable—in part because the saintly female traveler is lost” (Akhimie 122). The word “saintly” emerges as particularly important. Characterizing female travelers in this way is an attempt to excuse the decision to travel. Lassels portrays Whetenall as an exceptional woman by categorizing her as otherworldly, thus, her virtue would outweigh any assumed deviance that might be interpreted from her travels. Lassels’s impulse to remedy the connotations that were attached to traveling women is noteworthy because it is likely that similar justifications exist in other works of literature from the period.

In several instances, Shakespeare approaches Imogen’s travel in this fashion. He frequently employs language that encourages audiences to view Imogen as saintly, chaste, loyal, and virginal. She therefore embodies the qualities that might have been questioned when she decides to travel. In act two, Posthumus delivers a feverish rant when Iachimo falsely reports that

he has seduced Imogen, and in his speech, he suggests that Imogen maintained her virginity even after they were married (2.4.9-12). Despite Posthumus's angry accusation, the audience is aware that Iachimo's claims are false which keeps Imogen's modesty intact. In fact, Imogen represents a sort of hyper chastity given her sexual abstinence within a marriage. Pisanio also offers hyperbolic descriptions of Imogen's chastity when he refuses to believe Posthumus's claim that she has been unfaithful, responding to the allegation by claiming that she is "more goddess-like than wife-like" (3.2.8). For Pisanio, the idea that Imogen could be unfaithful is unimaginable, and he uses language similar to that of Lassels—comparing Imogen to a saintly, otherworldly figure. Pisanio delivers this line while he is alone on stage, making it more likely that Shakespeare is attempting to convince the audience of Imogen's perfection and inability to commit indiscretions. This notion reappears when Iachimo meets Imogen and exclaims that "she is alone th' Arabian bird" (1.5.17). Iachimo emphasizes her physical beauty, but also her uniqueness, reminding the audience that she exists "alone" in the category of exceptional women. Shakespeare frequently asserts Imogen's extraordinary chastity and virtue, and in that sense, he portrays her as an exception to rules governing women's travel. Her morality cannot be questioned because it is insisted upon so frequently and with such vigor. Shakespeare strategically positions her to be above reproach when she travels because she is more modest and pure than other women.

In addition to highlighting Imogen's chastity to legitimate her decision to travel, Shakespeare also portrays her as highly domestic despite that decision. She travels to regain her status as Posthumus's wife, and although she is engaging in the transgressive behavior of travel, she is doing so for domestic purposes. Accordingly, her behavior is less transgressive because she does not embark on her journey with intentions of expanding her academic or social horizons

as a man would. When she believes that Posthumus is nearby at Milford Haven, she exclaims, “Read, and tell me / How far ‘tis thither. If one of mean affairs / May plod it in a week, why may not I / Glide thither in a day?” (3.2.49-52). In comparing her motivations to those of someone with “mean affairs,” or less important motivations, she emphasizes the worthiness of her journey. She hopes to reunite with her husband not for the sake of adventure or excitement, and, accordingly, her decision might have seemed more acceptable to audiences. Unlike masculine travel, which was aimed at educational and social advancement, Imogen travels to find her husband and reestablish her role as a wife, and she therefore affirms gender dynamics.

Although she is traveling, Imogen continues to embrace domestic female roles. This notion is most apparent when Imogen first encounters Belarius, Arviragus, and Guiderius in the forest, and Belarius immediately assigns her the role of “huswife” (4.2.56). Furthermore, the men observe how successful she is in that role (which is also noteworthy because they believe her to be a young boy). Guiderius, in praising her abilities to care for him, says, “But his neat cookery! He cuts our roots in / characters, / And sauced our broths as Juno had been sick / and he her dieter” (4.2.48-51). Guiderius—and Shakespeare—draws attention to a fact that early modern audience would have expected: Imogen is a natural housewife. She thrives in the domestic realm, and she is an exceptional caretaker. In addition to impressing the men with her cooking, she also cuts their food into “characters” for their entertainment, and it seems that Imogen has found herself in a position that matches her skill set. Shakespeare might have moved Imogen out of her domestic space at court, but he creates a new one for her while she travels, thereby justifying her travel in suggesting that it is not different from her life at home. She does not actually subvert gender norms; she just subscribes to them in a new setting.

Another way that Shakespeare justifies Imogen's travel is by conveying its necessity for her physical and social survival. At the beginning of the play, she is surrounded by enemies at court who demonstrate immoral or dangerous behavior, and as a result, leaving her home is the best and only option. Remaining at court would have been a dangerous, likely deadly, decision. In fact, Pisanio acknowledges the threats to her life inside court when he advises her to "wear a mind as dark as [her] fortune is" (3.6.166-167). Although these threats force her to flee, her chastity is also at risk, which makes travel necessary. Amrita Sen, in her description of public fears resulting from female travel in the early modern period, notes that traveling women were sometimes "seen as either triggers or victims of real and imagined sexual advances from both Englishmen and foreigners" and that "traveling women themselves appeared to expose the company to dangerous foreign influences" (Sen 65). Sen's observation is fascinating because Imogen does not need to travel to encounter "dangerous foreign influences." They find her at home. Iachimo travels from Italy in an attempt to tarnish Imogen's reputation and his false claims about seducing her place her in danger. Not only is her modesty called into question, which would have had grave social implications, but Iachimo's lie also causes Posthumus to order Imogen's execution (3.2.15-20). Pisanio affirms that Iachimo represents dangerous foreign influence when he reacts to Iachimo's allegations, exclaiming, "How? Of Adultery? Wherefore write you not / What monster's her accuser?...O master, what strange infection / Is fall'n into thy ear? What false Italian, / As poisonous-tongued as handed, hath prevailed / On thy too ready hearing?" (3.2.1-6). Pisanio describes Iachimo as a poisonous serpent, emphasizing his propensity for evil, and he refers to him as a "false Italian," underscoring his status as a foreign interloper. In the context of the play, Iachimo embodies the foreign threat Sen considers, but in Imogen's case, the circumstances are reversed. Traveling does not make her vulnerable, but

remaining at court would have. When we consider that Imogen travels in response to a viable threat, her behavior seems more acceptable. She is not motivated by the incentives that a so-called deviant woman might have exhibited such as wanderlust or disdain for domesticity; therefore, she maintains her status as a decorous woman.

The incessant justification for Imogen's travel reveals that the play does not advise travel for most women. Travel literature from the period often contains this message, as these narratives tend to describe travel as an exclusively masculine activity. Women might have avoided travel not only because it would jeopardize their modesty but also because it would mean venturing into a masculine arena. Akhimie claims that the rise in circulation of travel literature which occurred during that period depicts travel as a "masculine pursuit undertaken in anticipation of...social advancement," noting that the activity would broaden social and professional possibilities for men "through the acquisition of languages, polished manners, practical knowledge, and a network of powerful connections" (Akhimie 123). If women were interested in travel, and if they were reading popular travel literature, they would have been reminded that travel was not appropriate for them.

The cultural notion that travel was a masculine undertaking is reflected in *Cymbeline*, in which Shakespeare depicts male travel as natural. When Iachimo travels from Britain to Italy, Posthumus remarks, "The swiftest harts have posted you by land, / And winds of all the corners kissed your sails / To make your vessel nimble" (2.4.31-33). Posthumus comments on something that the audience has likely noticed: Iachimo is able to travel a great distance in a remarkably short period of time. He travels from Britain to Italy within two short scenes, emphasizing the notion that his journey is seamless and therefore supported by nature. Posthumus says that Iachimo is aided by "swift harts" while he travels on land and that the winds allow for quick

travel by sea, and so we can gather that the ease of Iachimo's trip is a result of natural aids. This is even more important when we consider that his motivations are nefarious. Because he is traveling to disparage Imogen's reputation and destroy her marriage, the play makes it clear that morality and intentions are irrelevant. The only requirement for painless travel is being a man.

The men in the play are able to travel freely, and, in contrast, the playwright uses imagery and pointedly gendered language to characterize female travel as an unnatural activity. Imogen's experience with travel is considerably different. Two days after she begins her journey, she complains of its difficulties, claiming that "a man's life is a tedious one," and that after traveling by foot and making "the ground her bed," she is physically exhausted and on the verge of sickness (3.6.1-3). Immediately, her recognition that travel is a "tedious" activity provides clear evidence of her opinion—she does not recommend travel, rather, she denounces it, and her discomfort might serve as a warning to female spectators. Furthermore, Imogen complains of sleeping on the ground, and it seems that nature presents harsh obstacles along her journey. Nature's kindness, which blesses each leg of Iachimo's trip, does not extend to Imogen; it acts as an adversary rather than a benefactor, and her own language—her willingness to describe the act of travel as an integral part of "a man's life"—encourages the reading that male travel is acceptable while female travel is not. Imogen speaks of travel in gendered terms and acknowledges that her femininity is a severe hindrance to the pursuit. Even though she is dressed as a boy, the benefits of masculinity do not extend to her. Shakespeare encourages the audience to think that dressing as a man does not make masculine activities achievable for women, and the idea of female travel is made unattractive. In portraying travel as inherently difficult for women, Shakespeare de-romanticizes it, making it less appealing to potential travelers in the audience.

Imogen travels, but Shakespeare continually reminds the audience that she is an exception. We can surmise that Imogen likely would not have chosen travel—her complaints about its hardships verify that supposition—but her circumstances make it necessary. It seems that Shakespeare is confirming that truly virtuous women do not actually *want* to travel, and it is undesirable when it must occur. Primarily, female travel was taboo in the early modern period because of its connections to concerns over female chastity and domesticity; if women were expected to be home-bound and loyal, then travel would have been a threat to that ideology. When affixing these notions to Imogen, Shakespeare portrays her as more comfortable existing within normative categories. She flourishes in instances of domesticity and subordination. Although she engages in transgressive behavior, she does not pose an actual threat to the established gender order. Perhaps surprisingly, Shakespeare's take on female travel in *Cymbeline* resembles treatises advising women against travel.

III

Scholars have been interested in performed crossdressing for decades, and discourses about early modern English identities have naturally evolved to include non-binary categories. There is indisputable value in considering ways that trans and queer approaches expand our perceptions of early modern characters. Evidence suggests that *Cymbeline* does not undermine the binary gender system, and the play also encourages the interpretation that Imogen's gender is not fluid; she is a woman in man's clothing. I use variations of the word "crossdress" in this study for several reasons. To borrow from Simone Chess, the word crossdresser (despite its "anachronistic" quality) "has more positive, prideful associations and opens more doors than it closes," and it "productively puts an emphasis on the action and intent of cross-gender presentation." (Chess 24). Imogen's identity as a crossdresser revolves around her performance

of masculinity rather than a gender transformation, and under these contexts, the term is most appropriate. I also use the term in order to engage with the long history of criticism written about crossdressing characters.

Imogen's plan to crossdress is forged from multiple patriarchal objectives. Initially, when Pisanio rejects Posthumus's order to execute Imogen and she decides to travel, Pisanio directs her to Milford Haven, where she can reunite with her husband and convince him of her loyalty. He suggests that for her to "tread a course...haply near the residence of Posthumus" where she will be close enough to hear rumors of his activities, she will need to wear a disguise (3.4.166-175). He also instructs her to offer her services as a page to the Roman general Lucius Caius—presumably for her physical protection (3.4.198-200). The circumstances surrounding Imogen's decision to dress as a boy are more ambiguous than her inspirations to travel, and while she travels to resume her role as a wife, she crossdresses as an act of submission. She enthusiastically agrees to Pisanio's plan—interrupting his lesson on masculine behavior, she replies, "Nay, be brief. / I see into thy end and am almost / A man already," and she responds similarly to his suggestion that she join Lucius's service (3.4.191-212). It seems that she needs little persuasion outside of male direction. Imogen's willingness to submit to men commonly accompanies her experience with crossdressing, and from the beginning, her seeming transgressive behavior is depicted not as a rejection of patriarchal pressure, but as an extension of it.

Imogen's decision to travel reinforces gender expectations that existed in the early modern period, and Shakespeare continues this theme throughout *Cymbeline* through Imogen's crossdressing—another action that would have had grave social implications for women in the period. Crossdressers were subject to severe social criticism, and if female travel suggested a lack of chastity and purity, then crossdressing blatantly and visibly represented the subversion of

those traits. In his portrayal of Imogen, Shakespeare continually acknowledges these presumptions, and in order to validate the gender norms his audience would have observed, he employs visual and connotative tactics to establish Imogen as readily accepting of them. Imogen's language and actions validate ideal feminine traits such as dependency on male figures and chastity despite her participation in the overtly transgressive behavior of crossdressing.

It is impossible to enter a discussion on the topic of performed crossdressing without acknowledging that Shakespeare's stage was comprised entirely of male actors. The presence of boy actors undeniably contributed to the prevailing sense of gender ambiguity that existed in the culture of the theatre, but it is also important to remember that works of fiction demand imagination from spectators. In his discussion of "cross-gender casting" on the Renaissance stage, Michael Shapiro outlines arguments that have emerged from existing evidence. He claims, "the power of cross-gender casting to disrupt conventional gender roles implies a high level of awareness by audiences of the presence of play-boys in female roles," and he also acknowledges that "English theatergoers seem to have accepted boys in women's parts as the norm of theatrical representation" (Shapiro 41). I have argued that, as a traveler, Imogen is portrayed as excessively feminine, and I would also argue that the notable absence of irony or comedy in the lines that describe her as such underscore the possibility that audiences were meant to view her femininity plainly. Through her crossdressing, Shakespeare further emphasizes her femininity which serves two purposes: he invites spectators into the fiction of the play by encouraging them to see Imogen as a woman, and in doing so, he legitimates the binary gender system. Although she is crossdressed, she is still undeniably female.

Imogen's crossdressing inspires an examination of actual crossdressing in Britain in the 16th and 17th centuries. In his examination of the Bridewell Papers—an account of arrests that

occurred in the playhouse district—Bernard Capp outlines the penalties for female playgoers who crossdressed. Importantly, he begins his discussion with an examination of the morals of Renaissance theatre culture—a culture that he depicts as precarious for female spectators. He writes, “playhouses were most commonly associated with illicit sex, especially prostitution,” and he explains that a common fear existed that the “women corrupted or corrupting at playhouses might come from highly respectable backgrounds” (160). Capp’s account is important for several reasons. He sheds light on early modern preoccupations with female purity and chastity while underscoring the notion that theatre culture was viewed as a potential threat to those values. When Capp investigates crossdressing specifically, he claims that the “deliberate gender confusion” which resulted from crossdressing that was occurring both onstage and within the audience “delighted and titillated audiences” while “alarm[ing] contemporary moralists” (164). Although Capp recognizes that female-to-male crossdressing was sometimes non-consequential, most instances were met with harsh repercussions. In explaining the sources of anxiety about female crossdressing, he writes:

A young woman adopting male disguise was generally hoping to pass unnoticed in places or at times when an unaccompanied female was likely to be challenged or molested.

Cross-dressing empowered her, extending her freedom of movement and thus her range of options and opportunities. But magistrates and 'responsible citizens' believed a woman would only adopt such a disguise in order to breach the conventions of morality, law, or patriarchal authority, and they generally viewed cross-dressing as a cover for prostitutes, runaway servants, and vagrants. (163)

The idea that crossdressing was popularly imagined as an empowering enterprise for women, and that such empowerment was anxiety-provoking emphasizes the underlying patriarchal

motivations for eliminating the practice. It seems that crossdressing, in addition to jeopardizing the traits that made women socially valuable—traits like chastity, modesty, domesticity, and submissiveness—posed a fundamental threat to patriarchal power paradigms. Jean E. Howard supports that perspective when she observes that there were “strong discursive linkages throughout the period between female crossdressing and the threat of female sexual incontinence” (Howard, *Stage and Social Struggle*, 95). It appears that the social penalties for female crossdressing were aimed at preserving female modesty while upholding patriarchal power structures, and, accordingly, the playhouse would have been viewed as a threat to those ideals.

Playwrights who worked under these circumstances would have needed to consider the early modern fixation on gender order while also acknowledging that the culture of the theatre was a significant contributor to those anxieties. Shakespeare’s depiction of gender becomes much more complicated when we consider the cyclical relationship between theatrical practices on the Renaissance stage and his possible efforts to enforce gender binaries. Quite obviously, the convention of boy actors playing female roles further complicates gender systems when those characters crossdress. Given the respect that early modern audiences had for hierarchy and categorization of identity, it follows that someone who visibly rejected discrete categories of gender would have perpetuated confusion. Furthermore, the Bridewell Papers remind us that female spectators frequently crossdressed to attend plays, further enforcing the notion that gender fluidity was a strong presence in the culture of the theatre. If we accept that Shakespeare was attempting to validate existing gender norms, then he would have been working against a culture that he was also working within.

Given this historical context, Imogen's crossdressing would have affected audience perception in a number of ways. Her presence would have been exciting for certain audience members who enjoyed the spectacle of gender subversion, but the Bridewell evidence also confirms that crossdressing was a social misstep, and therefore, Imogen also posed a moral quandary. At the very least, given vast public condemnation of the practice, Shakespeare would have needed to justify Imogen's behavior, or he would have risked alienating certain audience members. Carmen Nocentelli summarizes this point when she argues the following of 17th century literature: "representations of women were...subject to a double bind. On the one hand, conventional markers of femininity—emotionality, weakness, passivity, and submissiveness—emphasized her vulnerability and sexual availability, inviting skepticism on her claims to propriety." She continues by explaining that, "the very traits that should have de-emphasized vulnerability and sexual availability—rationality, strength, activity, and dominance—cast her in the mold of the masculine woman, thereby exposing her as a gender transgressor" (Nocentelli 81). By crossdressing Imogen, Shakespeare "cast[s] her in the mold of the masculine woman," but he also makes a concerted effort to depict her as the embodiment of ideal femininity, and her female identity continually takes precedence over her male appearance.

Perhaps the most obvious way that Shakespeare presents Imogen's crossdressing as non-threatening is by characterizing her as highly subordinate to men. Female submission was a foundational concept within early modern gender systems, evidenced by Howard's claim that "woman's subordination to man was a chief instance, trumpeted from pulpit, instantiated in law, and acted upon by monarch and commoner alike" (Howard, *Stage and Social Struggle*, 94). Imogen's willing subordination affirms her acceptance of a cornerstone of early modern gender ideology. To begin, it is important to notice that reliance on men is part of Imogen's plan when

she first decides to crossdress. She intends to dress in male clothing then “desire [Lucius’s] service” (3.4.200). Imogen’s tendency to rely on men is also evident when Belarius proposes that she becomes a housewife. She responds, “well or ill, / I am bound to you” (4.2.45-46). This pattern continues when Lucius later stumbles across Imogen-as-Fidele, and he offers her a position as his page. Imogen readily responds, “I’ll follow, sir” (4.2.469). In these instances, Imogen is inclined to submit to male leadership, and she does so without hesitation or deliberation. She also uses overtly subordinate language. Saying that she is “bound” to Belarius, and willing to “follow” Lucius illustrates her codependence. She does not view herself as an independent woman, but as one who needs to bind herself to and follow male figures. The autonomy that Imogen might have acquired from crossdressing is stifled by her attachment to men. By crossdressing, Imogen is engaging in an activity that might have awarded her independence, yet she continually defers to the decisions of male characters. Although she finds herself in a position to demonstrate strength, her choices remind the audience that she belongs to the dependent sex. Theoretically, crossdressing might have, as Capp suggested earlier, “extend[ed] her freedom of movement and thus her range of options and opportunities,” yet she cannot—or will not—embrace that potential (Capp 163). Imogen’s submission is affirmed in the play’s conclusion, when, once she has reclaimed her place as a wife and princess, she outwardly promotes submissive behavior. In act 5, King Cymbeline learns that his sons Guiderius and Arviragus are alive and prepared to resume their places in line for the throne, and he remarks that Imogen is no longer the sole heir to his kingdom. He says, “O Imogen, / Thou hast lost by this a kingdom,” to which, in referring to her brothers, she responds “No, my lord, / I have got two worlds by’t” (5.5.371-373). These lines provide crucial insight into Imogen’s character and priorities. She is unbothered by this final loss of power, and she is willing to relinquish her role

as Cymbeline's sole heir to remain subordinate to the men in her family. She continues a pattern that she has set throughout the course of the play when she decides that deferring to her male companions is preferable to embracing her own power. Appropriately, Imogen's final lines are, "My good master, I will yet do you service," a sentiment which is characteristic of her constant desire to serve the men around her—perhaps at her own expense (5.5.403-404). She leaves the audience with a final reminder that she will remain subordinate to the men in her life and that her crossdressing did not affect her inherent feminine passivity. Shakespeare does not offer a powerful heroine who embraces autonomy for the duration of the play; rather, he presents Imogen as consistently dependent while seeking a return to a gender-stratified society.

Imogen's submission and docility within the dialogue of the play mark her as an overtly feminine character within early modern contexts, and imagining the performance of those characteristics illustrates how audiences might have perceived her. Because crossdressing is a physical and visual transgression, stage directions help balance audience interpretation of Imogen. In portraying Imogen's femininity, Shakespeare employs visual tactics like stage direction and actor engagement with physical space to mark her gender normativity. When we are introduced to Belarius, he vocalizes this theme when he says, "How hard it is to hide the sparks of nature!" (3.3.79). He refers to the fact that Guiderius and Arviragus are beginning to act like princes although they were removed from court as young boys, but his proclamation extends to other areas of the play—including Imogen's identity. Although he is legitimating categories of social and familial identity, the sentiment applies to the broader theme that clothing cannot disguise fixed identity. Belarius speaks these lines while he is alone on stage, presumably attempting to remind the audience that identity cannot be hidden by clothing, and it seems that

reinforcing categorization was a priority for the playwright. Belarius's soliloquy provides both physical and textual evidence that Shakespeare is legitimating social and gender categories.

Imogen's own actions also contribute to her apparent femininity. On more than one occasion, Imogen finds herself physically disempowered while she is dressed as Fidele. She becomes ill on the first leg of her journey, then, believing it to be medicine, she mistakenly ingests poison which causes her to fall into a death-like slumber. She is also struck by her husband in act 5 which causes her to fall to the ground—marking another demonstration of her physical weakness. This tactic is one that Shakespeare uses frequently when he crossdresses his female heroines, and it serves to remind the audience that femininity is more than an outward appearance. A well-known example appears in *As You Like It* when Rosalind faints upon hearing that Orlando has been attacked by a lion (4.3.155-160). Both Rosalind and Imogen, although disguised as boys, cannot hide their feminine weakness behind male clothing. Shapiro also notices that Imogen's helplessness is highlighted when she wakes next to Cloten's headless corpse. He argues, "Shakespeare's earlier heroines in male disguise have an edge over all characters in that they (and perhaps a single confidante) possess the secret of their real identity," and although that is true of Imogen, he claims that "any such advantage Imogen might hold is neutralized by her being unaware of other facts that the audience knows full well" (Shapiro 181). Shapiro cites Imogen's confusion about Cloten's corpse as evidence that dramatic irony is working against her, but throughout the play Imogen is often blind to threats to her life and livelihood. She sleeps through Iachimo's exploration of her chamber and body, she is initially unaware of her husband's plan to have her executed, and she does not know that Guiderius and Arviragus are her biological brothers. In these cases, Shakespeare strategically uses stage direction audience to affirm Imogen's helplessness. She is unable to exercise control of her own

narrative because she is often oblivious to it. For spectators, visual reminders of Imogen's vulnerability would have served as powerful reminders of the potential pitfalls of venturing outside of safe, domestic spaces.

Imogen's femininity is insisted upon with fervor and frequency, and in the end, the audience is reminded once again that her clothing does not undermine her true, female identity. Perhaps the most striking image in the final scene occurs when Imogen, after being reunited with her husband and verbally disclosing her real identity, embraces Posthumus and he muses, "Hang there like fruit, my soul, / Till the tree die (5.5.312-314). Although Imogen is still dressed as Fidele, her submission to Posthumus is on display. In discussing the importance audiences might have placed on clothing as it pertained to visible gender, Chess writes, "it is...deeply historically specific that gender expression—and with it clothing—came to have high stakes; what a person wore and how he/she acted had the potential to actually change his/her/their sex" (Chess 6). Chess's observation is useful here because Imogen's performed gender is not tied to her clothing at all; in fact, her unmasking seems to directly contradict this notion, and it therefore seems that Shakespeare underscores the notion that gender is an internal entity. Although she remains dressed as a boy, the audience and the other characters are encouraged to view her as an unambiguous woman—the fruit to her husband's tree.

IV

Shakespeare's potential conservatism appears more clearly when we compare it to the work of his contemporaries. Ben Jonson's *Epicene, or the Silent Woman* shows that Shakespeare's tendency to restore gender binaries in his plays' conclusions is not present in all works of the period. In her examination of *Epicene*, Simone Chess notes that the play's title

character, who is a young boy presented as a woman, “triumphs” at the play’s end (Chess 85). Instead of integrating *Epicene* into a binary gender system, the play’s conclusion features the title character “on stage, unwigged but still in his dress” (Chess 85). Despite its rejection of convention and “overt morality,” Jonson’s play was performed intermittently from 1609 until the London theatre closure in 1642 (Campbell xv-xvii). *Epicene*’s success is important because it demonstrates that gender normativity was not necessarily demanded by early modern audiences. Middleton and Dekker, too, include a gender-fluid character in *The Roaring Girl*, a play that concludes with the title character having “no intention of marrying, no intention of relinquishing either her outfit or the unconventional principles and behaviors it represents” (Rose 248). Although the final image of a crossdresser—still in the clothing of the opposite sex but unmasked to the audience and other players—is similarly found in *Cymbeline* and *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare forces his female crossdressers to resume their normative roles. *Twelfth Night* ends when Viola, still dressed as the boy Cesario, discloses her female identity and assures Orsino that she will begin wearing her “maid’s garments” again—at his request (5.1.288). Middleton, Dekker, and Jonson demonstrate the ability of Renaissance playwrights to leave gender ambiguous and present characters who choose not to assume binary gender roles. These examples suggest potential options for Shakespeare. Although retaining her male disguise indefinitely might not have been feasible or desirable for Imogen, there are crossdressers in Shakespeare’s canon who might have enjoyed the privileges associated with male disguise.

Shakespeare notably withholds power from other crossdressers who revel in the independence that comes with the action. While dressed as Ganymede, Rosalind demonstrates an ability to control her relationship with Orlando as she playfully manipulates his perceptions of the “real” Rosalind (4.1.45-212). While Rosalind enjoys the possibility of power in her romantic

relationship, Portia represents the potential for professional freedom in *The Merchant of Venice*. Acting as the lawyer Balthazar, Portia displays a keen understanding of the law, and the men of the play recognize that the “wisdom” she enacts in the courtroom scene prevents a tragic, violent ending (4.1.426-430). Of course, Portia’s venture into the professional world is short-lived, and she quickly and happily accepts her position as Bassanio’s wife in the play’s conclusion. Shakespeare’s tendency to prioritize heterosexual marriage, which serves as the goal for his crossdressed heroines, forces each of them to rebuke the hope of future autonomy, and his effort to reinstate binaries differentiates his crossdressers from those who appear in other works of Renaissance drama.

Foundational feminist criticism that examines crossdressing on the Renaissance stage clarifies how audiences might have perceived onstage crossdressers, and pairing that scholarship with modern investigations of traveling women in the period illuminates potentially didactic effects. Although *Cymbeline*’s possible impact on audiences is more easily understood when viewed through these lenses, it still stands out as an excessively—perhaps needlessly—complicated play within Shakespeare’s canon. Admittedly, the play itself encourages this response at times, but the problem is perpetuated by the fact that most examinations of *Cymbeline* do not employ modern theories that might unravel some of the play’s more perplexing incongruities—one of the most obvious being Imogen’s gender. *Cymbeline* contains elements that emphasize Imogen’s femininity despite her seeming fluidity, and viewing her through the lenses of travel and crossdressing clarifies her position within a binary gender system, yet much her characterization remains vague. Jean E. Howard articulates the sense of dissatisfaction that lingers after the play’s conclusions when she writes, “*Cymbeline* never quite dispels the sense that the world of the play is fundamentally chaotic and mysterious and the

plot's happy ending is a precarious bit of artifice" (Howard, "*Cymbeline*," 208). Notably, the "happy ending" that Howard reports contains an obvious reinstitution of patriarchal and binary ideologies. The line of primogeniture has been restored with male heirs in place, disguises have been removed, and Imogen has faithfully resumed her roles of wife and daughter. Despite the return of these rigid social structures at the end of the play, Howard does not mark the conclusion as oppressive or bleak, and although it may be both, she emphasizes its enigmatic quality which points to a fundamental lack of theoretical frameworks that would allow for more complete, coherent investigations.

In her recent study of male-to-female crossdressing, Simone Chess makes an important point about the current state of gender study in early modern criticism. She writes:

The ways in which we think and talk about gender have become more complex and interesting since scholars made the turn to trans* studies; now is the time, then, to come back to early modern crossdressers using language and ideas from trans* studies to complicate and clarify their genders individually and in relation to other characters and readers/audiences. (Chess 14)

I am in full agreement with Chess that viewing early modern texts through the framework of trans scholarship allows for a more interesting dialogue about early modern texts, and such approaches would undoubtedly expand our perspectives on *Cymbeline*. Imogen's identity appears relatively fixed within the play, and I have argued that Shakespeare portrays her as fully belonging to a binary category; however Chess notices that trans and queer scholarship can also enhance our knowledge of cisgender characters (Chess 16). She also notes that although crossdressing in Renaissance drama does not necessarily "indicate an identity," modern trans and queer scholarship has the possibility to "change, deepen, and nuance early modern characters and

their identities just as deeply as feminist readings inform and change the way we see female characters and as post-colonial studies shift our readings of characters of color” (Chess 15).

Applying trans and queer theory to Imogen’s experiences would likely shed light on some of its darker, more confusing corners—making the notoriously convoluted play more accessible.

Current understandings of the literal and figurative journey of *Cymbeline*’s traveling woman might confine her, but as theoretical approaches to gender evolve, so do the possibilities for the early modern characters they define.

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